

17. OCCURRENCE OF THE INDIAN SKIMMER  
*RHYNCHOPS ALBICOLLIS* SWAINSON IN ASSAM

The Indian skimmer *Rhynchops albicollis* Swainson is resident in the Indian subcontinent, ranging from Pakistan, North and Central India (not recorded south of *c.* 16° N) and east through Nepal and Bangladesh. Subject to local migration, depending on water conditions, populations of the bird have declined during the last few decades and it is now considered globally threatened (Collar *et al.* 1994).

On November 27, 1999, S. Rochelle (a tourist from the USA) and I were out on a jeep safari in the Kohora (Central) Range of Kaziranga National Park (26° 35'-25° 45' N and 93° 05'-93° 40' E). At about 1210 hrs, while passing through Mona Beel (a perennial oxbow lake), I saw two tern-like birds settle among a group of common teal *Anas crecca* along the side of the wetland. The birds appeared to have dark wings and looked strikingly different from the ubiquitous river tern *Sterna aurantia*. After driving along the beel for a few hundred metres while the sun was behind us, I stopped to take a closer look. On observation through a pair of 10x binoculars and a 20x telescope, I noted the following characteristics:

A long-winged bird about the size of a crow (larger than the river tern of which there were several nearby) — dark blackish-brown wings projecting beyond the tail; black crown and nape contrasting with white forehead; white sides of neck forming a white collar; rest of underparts glistening white; large red beak with the lower mandible longer than upper; legs red. I recognized the birds as Indian skimmers, the pied plumage and beak being distinctive of the species.

The birds were seen at the same place the

following day and they remained in the area till December 2, 1999. T. Gullick and E. Stanford (birdwatchers from Spain and the UK respectively) were among others who had also seen the birds.

The status of the Indian skimmer in Northeast India is poorly known. Ali and Ripley (1981) mention that the bird affects the placid expansive reaches of rivers with sandbanks, and include the Brahmaputra river system in its range. However, there have been no recent records of this species from the region. In their more recent work, Grimmett *et al.* (1998) have excluded Assam from its range. In December 1998, B.N. Talukdar (Assistant Conservator of Forests, Assam State Forest Department) and I surveyed *c.* 700 km (the course of the Brahmaputra in Assam is 720 km) stretch of the Brahmaputra river, from Dhubri (Indo-Bangladesh border *c.* 90° E) to Oriamghat (Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border *c.* 95° E), but could not find any skimmers. The habitat along the river was found to be highly disturbed (more so west of Guwahati) and chances of the river supporting any skimmer population is slim. I have not come across this bird during my seven years of bird watching in the Kaziranga National Park, nor has there been any other record (Barua and Sharma 1999). Hence, this record is noteworthy.

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MAAN BARUA

*Barua Bhavan, 107 M.C. Road,  
Uzan Bazaar, Guwahati 781 001,  
Assam, India.*

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